

AWM  
Thrs my oldest Brother  
"your greatest uncle"

STORY OF THOMAS N. DENKER

(Written March, 1984 - June 1987)

I was born at home, east of Bersford, South Dakota, in Lincoln County on August 29, 1895. I believe it was during a depression; my dad mentioned they burned ears of corn (.05 a bushel) and it was much cheaper than coal.

My parents had come from northern Europe. Dad, Burchard Denker, was 16 and came to the U.S. before he could be drafted into the army of Germany. Dad came over with his older brother Karl, also known as Charlie. Karl had been in the German calvary. They landed at Castle Garden, New York, in June, 1885, and dad took out his naturalization papers in July, 1892. Mother, Bina Pearson, came from Sweden when she was 19, in 1891. Mother had a brother here, Nels Pearson. Both mother and dad came on borrowed money and after a while they both started working for a couple named Brassfield in Illinois and that is where they met. Mother cleaned their house and dad did odd jobs around the place. Dad and mother were married March 1, 1894, in Petersburg, Illinois (Menard County).

After they were married they moved to South Dakota. I think Uncle Charlie had something to do with their moving there. Uncle Charlie married a lady from nearby Iowa and he settled near Alcester.

The country was rich corn land as many years earlier it had been built up by melting glaciers. The land was all hills and valleys; I think the hills were called moraines. Dad took me by the place I was born about 35 years ago. The buildings were gone; there was just a corn field.

After about a year near Bersford, my folks and I moved across the road from our first place to a farm in Union County where we lived for about five years. Then dad and Uncle Charlie decided to move west to the Missouri River region in Charles Mix County where they bought farms. Dad's farm was several miles north of Wagner and Uncle Charlie's was one mile south.

The household goods were shipped by train, so my mother, Aunt Mary, and all of us kids got to ride free in the caboose. We arrived at Wagner in the early morning.

The men came by teams and wagons. They slept in haystacks along the way. They carried their "eats" with them.

Our place was about three miles east of Lake Andes. The lake had been dug out

by glaciers and in later years it was filled with water from four artesian wells the government had dug. It was not very deep and it had a lot of cattails growing in places. One Fourth of July dad got a boat and we went fishing. The water was very clear and in the clearing around the cattails we saw fish swim around. We baited hooks, but no bites were recorded.

One Christmas Day dad and an uncle of mine went to the area near the artesian wells. The catfish were swarming in the warm water. We would cast out among the fish and snag one. A warden came around and said he wanted some fish. He had a hooped sack and my uncle and I waded into the water and sacked a good mess for both of us. The ground outside was frozen solid.

The farm was next to the Yankton Indian Reservation. It had been homesteaded from land the Indians had not chosen. All the land west of our place was Indian land. Dad rented the pasture across the road from us from Joe Bobtail.

All our 160 acres was broken out. We raised wheat, corn, and flax. I never knew how my dad could buy the land. I am assuming one of his brothers, Gus who was in the bank at nearby Delmont, gave some help in buying the farm.

One of my first parts in farming was driving a team of horses hitched to a rake. I dumped the hay in rows behind the mowers. During a big prairie fire in the fall, two big haystacks that were still in the field were burned.

I went to a school called Kennedy; it was the only school nearby. It was about 1 1/2 miles from our place if we walked on the road. All of us walked every day except during blizzards.

One day I cut across the fields. Several skunks had fallen in a shallow hole, it could have been a dry well, and I sort of teased the skunks. When I got to school the teacher sent me home because I did not smell good.

This country had almost no trees. Dad grew some trees along the north and west sides of the place. He had a small area of small spruce trees. I don't think they did very good.

While we existed on the farm a telephone line was built along the road by our place. It was a humming line; it hummed almost all the time. A store was down the road about a half mile. Dad hauled his milk to this store where the milk was separated. They bought the cream and dad fed the skim milk to the hogs.

After about six years here, dad decided South Dakota was too cold in the winter for him and mother didn't like all the drinking the Germans did, so dad went to Guthrie, Oklahoma, to look for a place to live. However, he did not like it there so he took the train back to Enid. While at the depot he met some Iowa folk who were

also looking for a warmer place. They were going to Garber and they invited him along. He liked it there and bought a quarter of land 3 miles south of town for, I believe, \$6,400.

We had a public sale in early February before we left for Oklahoma. It was a nice day with the snow melting. A lot of us boys got into a snowball fight and us smaller boys had to make the snowballs. At noon we had a free lunch with the auctioneer furnishing the tin cup for coffee.

An uncle of mine, Gus Dencker, clerked the sale and stayed at our house over night. During the evening he did the accounting of the sale and I sat and watched him count the money. He had a number of stacks of silver dollars on the kitchen table as well as a number of smaller coins.

After the sale dad filled a small rail car with furniture and other belongings and took the family to Garber, Oklahoma. While on the way to Garber, my sister Anna and brother Fred were getting into mischief. They decided they wanted some chewing gum (dad didn't like us kids to have gum) so they got the gum stuck under the seats and began chewing. They were having a great time until mother found them. She was horrified.

We arrived at the Garber depot on the 22nd of February, 1906. The band was playing and marching on the main street when we arrived. It was not because of us, but it was Washington's birthday. It sure was a lovely day.

We stayed at the Sherman Hotel in Garber until a neighbor, Kirk Chitwood, met us with his wagon and took us out to new home (it was the Arthur Jones homestead). It had 5 graneries, a six-room house and other buildings.

The depot was a fine place with a place for colored people and us white folks, a telegraph, and a time table. Some folks called the train Joker. I don't know why, but I think it was because it did not always make the time schedule. Anyhow, it was a nice place to watch the trains come in leaving passengers, mail, and express.

Garber merchantile--groceries, dry goods, post office, and credit. My folks sold their excess butter and eggs (the hens did not seem to like to lay eggs in the winter but made up for it in the spring.) When we bought something it went on credit. When the folks sold something they paid off the store and started the credit over again.

Somebody thought Garfield County was a good place to grow cotton. A gin was installed in Garber and it baled a little cotton. It also took off the arm of the gin operator. There was also a gin in Enid and I think in Drummond. Dad had planted a small patch but it did not yield much. I think the wheat farmer did not like to

use the hoe and cotton soon faded.

There was a flour mill on the east side of town where we could take our wheat to be made into flour. The flour was sacked in a 25 pound cloth. The bread was made at the home. Housewives were often exchanging homemade yeast.

The barber shop was always a busy place with a lot of gossip, a 15 cent shave and a 25 cent haircut. In 1910 my grandpa, Nicholas Dencker, came from Germany to visit my parents and his other sons. He didn't speak English. My dad took him to Hammer's barber shop where Hammer said he could understand German. Grandpa said something about the clippers on the table and Hammer thought he wanted his hair clipped by them. Anyway, we ended up putting mother's hood on grandpa's head to keep him from catching cold.

There was a butcher shop owned by a couple of our neighbors, Charlie Wolfe and R. S. Goode. They would buy some of our surplus cattle and slaughter them in the pasture and take the edible portions into town. I expect they had to ship in ice as none was made in Garber. I don't think they had electricity in Garber until after World War I.

The winter weather has not changed much throughout the years. During my younger years the late winter brought a lot of junior sickness. Pneumonia was very prominent after the Christmas season. The doctor was on the road a lot in his horse and buggy making house calls. One of the neighbor boys got pneumonia. Dad and some neighbors sat up with him on the crisis night bathing him to keep his temperature down.

One experience I can vividly remember started as I went to feed some horses on a farm about one half mile from home. I ran over and fed the horses and then ran back home. When I got home my ears were frozen stiff. Mother rubbed snow on them while they were thawing. After they thawed they were swollen like a couple of doughnuts and were rather painful. No doctor was seen for treatment, but I guess they became as good as ever except for being a little more tender.

Our doctor, Dr. McVicker, decided to take a course in surgery and Dr. Looper took his place. Dr. McVicker came back to Garber for a visit. My brother Frank, who was about a year or two old, had a hernia and both doctors operated on him. Frank was placed on the kitchen table for the operation. Everything went well. Mother was the nurse and she had to heat a flat iron to put under his arm while he came to. This was to keep him warm. Somehow she did not keep the iron wrapped because Frank received a large burned place under his arm. That is what hurt him the worst.

One spring day, in 1916 or 1917, dad was coming home from the south place on

1/21/96  
Charley - I was walking along behind when this  
all took place - ~~near~~ just past Wolfes house -  
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what is now Highway 74 riding the plow. A car came along and honked the horn scaring the mules. Dad jumped off the plow and received a compound fracture on a lower leg. They took him to the hospital in Enid in a wagon driven by either the Wolfes or the Chitwoods. The hospital was a two-story house on East Broadway a block away from the railroad tracks. While dad was there, he mentioned he had a daughter who wanted to take nurses training. They took her in and that is how my sister Anna started her nurses training.

I attended Liberty School, which was about a mile and a quarter west of our house, for a number of my pre-high school education years. Liberty was later attached to the Garber School system. My dog went to school with us children. One day us boys tied a tin can to his tail. Well, the dog did not like that so he tore for home as fast as he could go. That ended his education.

We played a game called Shinney. It was somewhat like ice hockey, only we had no ice. We used the school ground for a court. We simply beat a tin can around with a club-like stick (so I guess they had tin cans in those days even though our produce was either dried, salted, or put up in jars.)

We had a man teacher our first spring in Oklahoma. This was our only man teacher at Liberty. One season we had three different teachers. The first became sick and the second had a disagreement with one of the patrons over teaching a course of agriculture, one of the necessary school courses. She quit and then another finished the year. They were all fairly good in my estimation. They received about \$30 a month.

Liberty School was also a community center. On Sunday afternoon we had Sunday School and preaching. The First Christian Church of Garber had a university student for their weekend minister. He came to Liberty on Sunday afternoon to give the sermon. Someone from the community brought him out for dinner and drove him back for his Garber Sunday evening meeting. There were several converts and they were baptized in Boggy Creek about one half mile east of the school. Mother always seemed to have the best meals when it was our turn to bring him out.

The teachers were good organizers for the community. We always had a good Christmas program. One time some folks got a dead peach tree and tied cedar limbs to it to make a Christmas tree. A reflector oil lamp was placed on a stand behind the tree for light. Popped popcorn was sewn into strands and hung around the tree. There were few presents under the tree as nobody received many presents in those days.

When I finished the 8th grade I attended high school in Garber. It was a square, two-story building on the south side of town with two rooms upstairs. The high school consisted of only the 9th and 10th grades. There were six students--three girls and three boys. Four of us were from the country and two from town. Algebra, English, History, and Latin were taken in the 9th grade and in the 10th grade Geometry, English, History, and I believe, Caesar.

The first year at Garber I rode my bike or walked the three miles. The second year my sister Anna went along and we rode in a horse and buggy. We parked the horse in the barn in back of Professor Hoar's home.

After finishing the 10th grade at Garber I attended high school at Oklahoma Christian University (now Phillips University) in Enid. I believe all of us boys finished high school there. Students from all parts of Garfield County were there, except from Waukomis which had the only high school outside of Enid.

There was a new gymnasium at the university and during my junior and seniors years, 1915 and 1916, I took to sports. The high school and college students made up the various teams. I participated in football, basketball, baseball, and track. Basketball was the sport I lettered in. Being approximately six foot tall I was one of the tallest players in the league. I jumped center for our team and I jumped a lot, since every time a team scored we jumped at center court to see who got the ball.

We played at Oklahoma A & M in Stillwater in an old barn while Northwestern Normal in Alva had a good gymnasium. We also played Southwestern Normal in Weatherford, Kingfisher College in Kingfisher, and Central State Normal in Edmond.

There was a running track above the gym floor which folks could sit on and watch ballgames. One graduate from Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical School had a huge pennant hanging from the railing. A couple of boys took it out the east door and the graduate went after them but lost them in the darkness. The pennant was a fixture around the east part of Enid for some time.

During track season we would run out to the now extinct stock pavillion, a place where they would hold livestock shows. This was about a mile and a quarter east of the school, east of where Varsity Square is now located.

The school dairy was across the street north of the campus. One night a bunch of us boys became hungry for oyster soup. We milked all the cows that would tolerate it and several boys with motorcycles went to town for oysters and crackers. We finally got enough milk and we went down to the lake and built a fire and cooked the soup in some kettles the Batch boys had.

Street cars came out to the campus. The tracks were laid in a large circle so the cars could turn around. The circle received a good coat of axle grease at Halloween.

I stayed at what was called the "Timothy Club." This consisted of some preachers and some high school boys. The dining room and the club mother was downstairs while we stayed in upstairs bedrooms for \$.50 a week per person. Each room had a monkey stove for heat. I roomed with a boy from Carman. During my last semester at the school I became the dishwasher. I washed for my board. There were about ten or twelve boys eating there.

The preachers generally went to preach on weekends. The one that went to Pollo (which I believe is now extinct) always brought back some butter and eggs and seasonal vegetables.

The oil excitement came in 1916 with a strike on the Hoy farm. A rumor was circulating, so I walked over there. It was about two miles from our house--as the crow flies. When I got there I saw a small crowd. The drillers were doing some pipe work and the oil well was sort of mushrooming every few minutes and the oil was flowing into a nearby creek. The oil flow was not anticipated at that depth.

After high school I lived on the farm and attended business college. The farm still had no electricity or any other convenience. All it had was work. My folks bought their first Ford car during this time and I was learning to drive.

I would have been in the army, and not on the farm, but dad's broken leg kept me out. I was given a furlough to plant wheat. As soon as I finished the planting I was offered a position with the Quarter Master's Unit of the War Department in Washington, D.C. I was paid \$1800 a year with new money that looked as if it was just off the printing press. I was offered this job because of a government exam I had taken while in business college.

I was a clerk in the War Department and handled invoices. I remember handling an invoice from Montgomery Wards for a large amount of horse harnesses. At this time the military mainly used horses for transportation. I lived in an apartment house on the third floor with a sailor and a man named Clarence Nichols. We hardly ever saw the sailor. After four months in Washington, President Wilson sent me a greeting saying the army wanted me. This was in 1918.

I was sent to San Antonio, Texas, to the 165 Depot Brigade with my first safety razor. The razor was a sending away gift from an organization in Garber. In San Antonio, the army fixed me up to be a soldier and taught me how to kitchen police and then decided I would be a railroad engineer. They sent a bunch of us boys to

Montgomery, Alabama, to get the company up to full strength and to get us some soldiering and then they sent us to Camp Meredith. From there we marched to the Hudson River, got on a tugboat for a trip to Hoboken, New Jersey, where we were put on a banana boat, the Calamares, and then we were towed out into the harbor where the company, 14 ships, and 5200 enlisted personnel set out for France.

After 12 days we landed at Brest, France, and took a train made up of third-class coaches. Each coach was supposed to hold ten persons, but eight boys and their packs made a tight fit.

Our destination was the Toul sector where we slept in our pup tents. Finally we were billeted in the French buildings, mostly in the hay barns. I got a place over the chicken house in which the rooster started crowing about 4 every morning.

We finished our railroad about the time the war was over. We spent some time in the battlefield salvaging the German rail system, hunting souvenirs, and roaming.

In the early spring we were moved on boxcars to Sauvoy where we killed our time repairing the French roads. Our company departed in late June from Brest on the Manitou, which some said was an English cattle boat that had been sunk and repaired. The Manitou, which we called the Seventh Day Adventists because we had to stop on Saturdays for repairs, listed to the right all across the ocean.

We arrived in the New York harbor sometime in July. The city had a welcome boat meet us in the harbor. It had taken us 14 days to cross the ocean. A lot of the city's newspapers were thrown on the boat as were streamers. A big crowd welcomed us.

We were then tugged to a pier in New Jersey and a train took us to Camp Meritt where our company was split up. While we were at the camp, we received a pass to see the city of New York. A number of us went to Coney Island. We were supposed to be back by 6 p.m. but somehow we did not get back until much later. We were to have been paid that evening but since we weren't there the captain had to keep our pay. This aggravated him, so he had the top sergeant put all eight of us on extra duty for the rest of our days in the army.

The Texans and Okies were sent to Little Rock to be discharged. On our way to Little Rock we had to guard the train's cook car. We had plenty of good eating while doing so. When we arrived at Little Rock they were having one of their red hot days. We still had our wool clothes on and we had to unload a train car of material that was allotted to our part of the company.

We were discharged at the camp in Little Rock on July 22, 1919. A sergeant took us to the depot and bought us a ticket for our home station. A bunch of us



Okies were routed on the Rock Island. When we got to Holdenville, Oklahoma, the train engine broke down and we had to wait while another engine was secured.

When I arrived in Enid my folks met me in their non-Ford <sup>a chandler touring car</sup> car. They took me to their home at 1231 E. Broadway in Enid where I stayed for a short time.

While I was in the army, oil was struck on one of the folk's farms. They had a sale and sold their Ford car for more than they had originally paid for it. They moved to Canyon City, Colorado, for a time and then moved to their big home on East Broadway in Enid. After my return from the army I returned to school at Phillips University, this time for college, and lived a somewhat different life from my previous years.

Dad got tired of town life and traded his house on East Broadway for a half-section of land one mile south and three miles west of El Reno. He also bought a plot of ground on South 30th close to Enid where dad wanted to build a big fine barn and mother wanted a fine big house. Jake Stout of Enid built the house while I spent a lot of time loading sand in the wagon from a sand bed on Skeleton Creek for use on both of the buildings.

It is said one can take the boy out of the country, but can't take the country out of the boy. So I began farming again.

On August 25, 1926, Beatrice Hawn, a Phillip's University student, and I were married in Amarillo, Texas, in a Christian Church parsonage. We were to have been married at her parent's home in Adrian, Texas, but they had threshers at their house so we got two witnesses from Adrian and got married.

A new house was built for us across the road from my parents. I dug the basement with a team of horses and a slip. I farmed with horses until the Ford tractor became available and I progressed on with bigger tractors. Now I have a tractor with a radio and hot and cool system.

When I was a mere child in Dakota, I remember Dad thrashing wheat with horse power, a man cutting bands before the cylinder, and two men stacking straw behind a straw conveyer. In the early time in Oklahoma wheat was hauled to the thresher run by steam engine power followed by a period of horse-drawn combines. Then there was tractor-drawn combines, then self-propelled, and then cab mounted with radio, hot and cold temperatures.

We had help from our daughters Elaine, Janice, and from Thomas Jr., but they have long flown the coop.

My first ride on an airplane was a flight to Amarillo. It was beautiful at the Enid Airport but a norther came on route. The russian thistles (tumbleweeds) were

rolling briskly across the Woodward Airport when we landed and at Amarillo snow was falling. About 1983 I rode a big plane to Los Angeles. Just like riding on calm air. I think we arrived in Los Angeles before we left Oklahoma City (faster than time).

When I was much younger, the ladies claimed that they could see a man on the moon. However, I could never see one. Astronauts began going into space and around the moon. Some had a vehicle which could jump off the space ship and land on a level place on the moon and get back on the space ship. I don't think they saw any men on the moon. Just rock. A gal by the name of Sally went along on one space flight for the ride. Maybe she wanted to see if there was a man on the moon. However, she never mentioned ever seeing one. Maybe the men were hiding behind the rocks.

There were six of us in the Denker family. Sister Anna in Los Angeles; brother Fred (Fritz), Alva; brother John, Petuluma, California; brother Frank, Clifton, Texas; and brother Charles of Tonkawa. Fred, John, and Anna have gone to the happy hunting grounds as of 1987.

As for me, I am thinking about getting my life into three centuries. It seems like everything has been invented that can be, but improvements are happening everyday. I would like to see how the 21st century will start while I am sitting under a tree watching a computer do my farming.

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In the spring of 1986 I held a moon rock in one of the museums in Washington, D.C. It looked and felt like some of this earth's works.